

Information Literacy Develops Globally

The Role of the National Forum on Information Literacy

Craig Gibson

From the vantage point of 2004, school and academic librarians can reflect on the rapid changes in a relatively short order in their careers. Certainly, the most remarked upon is the advent of the Web and the explosion of information in dizzying volume, in many formats, and from many sources. Indeed, it is difficult to remember pre-Internet days because our professional and personal lives, as well as those of our students, have become intertwined with the Web in all of its fragmentation and unpredictability. Fortunately, one established progressive educational agenda offers the means to manage this instability and complexity: the educational reform movement known as information literacy.

Information literacy has come into its own in the Information Age. The impact of new technologies, the proliferation of networks, the societal divisions caused by inequities in access, the focus on student-centered learning, and the push for accountability and results-based learning have created optimal conditions for it to flourish. By itself, information literacy—the ability to locate, evaluate, and manage information—can be taught as a skill set similar to earlier models of library skills instruction, but, when connected with other reform agendas, it transcends those skill-based approaches. Today many stakeholders at all levels of education have an interest in, and the expertise to promote, information literacy on this broader level. In the current environment, information literacy has become the connective tissue that binds student learning, faculty and teacher development, community partnerships, and societal change.

Many players who have much to offer—this is the story of the National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL), a group formed in 1990 to promote information literacy on many fronts.¹ Previously, in 1988, ALA had formed a Presidential Committee on Information Literacy to explore the social, educational, and economic effects of the information explosion. This group issued a report in 1989 offering a well-known definition of information literacy and making a number of recommendations.² The report advocated the formation of a coalition of organizations dedicated to promoting information literacy. Hence the birth of NFIL.

The National Forum: Vision, Governance, Successes

Conceived as an umbrella group of organizations, NFIL was established to address all major educational and societal issues connected to information literacy, including the allied concepts of lifelong and resource-based learning. Forum meetings have focused on information literacy's relationship to teacher education standards; service learning; small business development; skills needed by citizens, decision-makers and workers; and health information, as well as the connection between information literacy and technology skills.

The overarching purpose of the forum's meetings, under the leadership of Patricia Breivik,

is to advance the most expansive and compelling sense of information literacy by initiating conversations among member organizations, lending specific support for defined agendas and initiatives, and forging a common purpose among a large sector of educational, business, nonprofit, and governmental communities to improve the lives of all citizens. Therefore, NFIL serves as a clearinghouse for information, a support network for connecting diverse organizations and sustaining the information literacy agenda over time, and an incubator for ideas to promote information literacy nationally and internationally.

As a voluntary organization, the forum has no fees or dues, no formal organizational structure, no hierarchy, no bylaws, and no budget. Interested organizations send representatives to three meetings each year in Washington, D.C. Lively discussions provoked by guest speakers and special topic presentations often lead to new insights about information literacy, educational reform, and, especially important, opportunities for cross-organizational collaboration. The forum maintains a Web site with a roster of member organizations, links to key documents, and core definitions of information literacy and allied concepts.³

One notable NFIL success involves the support of information literacy standards developed by member organizations. For example, the forum supported AASL's Information Power standards and championed the Association of College and Research Libraries when it appointed a task force to develop the *Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education*.⁴ The latter have, in turn, received the endorsement of the American Association of Higher Education, another forum member.⁵ A related and compelling example is NFIL's work on the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education standards. As a result, information literacy competencies are included in the education of future classroom teachers so that they can collaborate effectively with school library media specialists on resource-based learning and, more broadly, on information-literacy initiatives in local school districts.

Information Literacy Outside the United States

Despite many political, economic, and educational shifts in the larger educational arena since 1990, NFIL's predominantly American members continue to demonstrate commitment to American educational reform. However, for a number of years, one member organization, the International Association of School Librarianship, has highlighted information literacy in countries outside the United States during its annual conference. More recently, in response to the global information explosion and to rectify worldwide inequities in access to quality information, other international members have shown interest in promoting information literacy on the broadest possible level through the forum. Newer member organizations from around the world include the Australian Library and Information Association; the Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy; the Chinese Library Association; the International Association of Technological University Libraries; the Nordic Council on Scientific Information (NORDINFO); and the United Kingdom and Ireland's Society of College, National, and University Libraries Advisory Committee on Information Literacy.⁶ Their international perspective has enriched members' understanding of the worldwide challenges and successes of the information literacy movement.

Expanded Understanding of Information Literacy

It has become clear that the familiar American conception of information literacy is, almost certainly, too limited. Connected to the familiar work of instructing students in how to find, evaluate, and manage information for school tasks or academic assignments, this conception has been elaborated most often through normative standards, based upon educational leaders' views of what constitutes information literate behavior. Missing is a sense of how information is experienced. Missing, too, is a more complex view of assessment—as more than just testing of skills—tied to information literacy. Finally, the application of information literacy in the professions, in the workplace, and in community life is generally absent in the United States.

A more comprehensive view is certainly possible. An Australian researcher, Christine Bruce, has conducted groundbreaking research on information literacy. The implications of her research are often discussed at the forum because her seven-faces conception goes to the core of the experiential dimension of information literacy—how information is seen, handled, felt, known, acted upon, and used by academic professionals in their work lives.⁷ Potentially this experiential dimension could complement the normative standards developed in the United States—standards developed without actually conducting research on the behaviors and habits of students and researchers. Conversely, because the American standards enunciate learning outcomes, benchmarks for learning that reflect the intellectual growth associated with Bruce's experiential model could be developed. In addition, the worldwide interest in information literacy in the professions has important implications for lifelong learning in the workplace. This convergence of perspectives among the United States, Australia, and other countries opens up other possibilities for forging a truly global agenda for information literacy.⁸

Recent International Developments and the Future

Building upon the emerging international interest in information literacy, NFIL partnered with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and the National Commission on Library and Information Science to sponsor an international leadership conference in the Czech Republic on information literacy. Several years in the planning, this conference tapped the expertise of forty invited experts to address information literacy topics in such sectors as education, economic development, human services, library and information science, and policy. Held in September 2003, the conference resulted in rich discussions involving participants from twenty-three countries, including Afghanistan, Australia, Canada, Cuba, Finland, France, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁹

The Prague conference published a declaration affirming the necessity of an information society for the cultural and economic development of every nation.¹⁰ In underlining the global need for information-literate citizenries, the declaration challenged all nations to address the digital divide and suggested that the information literacy agenda become part of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). The themes that emerged from the Prague conference will guide a larger international congress planned for 2005.

NFIL has strengthened worldwide understanding of information literacy, first by modeling how a coalition of diverse organizations can act together on a common agenda. (Various groups in Australia, for example, are interested in setting up a comparable umbrella group.) Second, the forum is sought after by organizations and individuals from many countries to advise them on promoting information literacy within their own cultures. This promises future development of a

more organized global community of interest with common goals and structures. Third, the forum hopes to engage the interest of international nongovernmental organizations in information Literacy in order to address issues of citizenship, economic development, and educational improvement. Finally, through participation in the forum, K—12 education reform has the potential to align more seamlessly with initiatives in higher education, resulting in a unified K-20 educational reform/ information literacy agenda—with an internationally enriched perspective.

The forum's threefold role as clearinghouse of information, incubator of ideas, and support network, all related to information Literacy at every levels of education, in all countries, and in all sectors of society, is both visionary and practical. School Librarians can benefit from the forum's work to find those common threads, related to lifelong learning to the improvement of the quality of students' lives, that tie together our interests globally.

References and Notes

1. Sigrun Klara Hannesdottir, *Global Issues in 21st Century Research Librarianship: NORDINFO's 25th Anniversary Production* (Helsinki: NORDINFO, 2002).
2. Hannesdottir, *Global Issues in 21st Century Research Librarianship*.
3. The National Forum on Information Literacy, <www.infolit.org>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2003.
4. The Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning, <www.ala.org/aasl>, path: Professional Tools; Information Power. Accessed 10 Dec. 2003- Association of College and Research Libraries, "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," <www.ala.org/acrl>, path: Standards and Guidelines. Accessed 10 Dec. 2003-
5. See the note "AAHE's Board Endorses Information Literacy Standards" at the end of "Information Literacy and the Endangered Campus" by Patricia Breivik <http://aahebulletin.com/public/archive/nov2000_1.asp#endorse> Accessed 9 Feb. 2004.
6. All NIFL member organizations are listed under "Members" on the group's Web site, <www.infolit.org>.
7. Christine Bruce, *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy* (Adelaide, Australia: Auslib Pr., 1997).
8. Patricia Breivik, NFIL chair, has discussed the potential convergence of information Literacy agendas through international dialogue at more than one forum meeting.
9. NFIL, International Conference of Information Literacy Experts, <www.infolit.org/International_Conference>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2003.
10. NFIL, The Prague Declaration: "Towards an Information Literate Society," <www.infolit.org/International_Conference/PragueDeclaration.pdf>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2003.